City Park Conditions

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Measuring What Matters: Neighborhood Research for Economic and Environmental Health and Justice in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo

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CITY PARK CONDITIONS

A broken bench found during the Richmond Park Survey

Marcus Jenkins,[1] now 16 years old, remembers going to Lucas Park across the street from his house when park staff would open the recreation center and hand out balls and sports equipment and lead him, his cousin, and other neighborhood children in activities like tennis tournaments. "We used to go there all the time," he recalls. "The pavement was smooth, and now it's all cracked and broken. You can't do anything on it anymore." The recreation center now sits abandoned, play structures have been taken out, the bathrooms are never open and the water fountains do not work, and Marcus has not used the park in years.

The condition and accessibility of parks impact whether and how often people use them. Although Richmond is home to more than 50 parks throughout the city, the actual acreage of the parks is about half what the National Parks and Recreation Association (NPRA) recommends for a city of Richmond's size. Richmond has 2.6 acres of neighborhood and community parks per 1,000 residents, while the NPRA recommends five acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.[2] According to the 2006 City of Richmond Citizen Survey, three-fourths (76%) of residents had visited a park in Richmond in the last year.[3] Nearly two-thirds (65%) of residents said improving park conditions was essential or very important.[4]

Parks become the primary resource for physical activity in a community like West County. Residents of low-income neighborhoods often rely on parks and other public recreation amenities as places to exercise because they cannot afford gym memberships and lack safe streets and large backyards where they can be active.[5] Recreational opportunities for low-income residents should be close to home, since they often have less time for physical activity due to multiple jobs or caretaking responsibilities.[6] In the face of pressing survival concerns as well as serious time and resource constraints, physical activity often becomes a lower priority—especially if places to exercise are not easy to access. Overall, parks have a critical role in fostering physical activity in low-income communities of color.[7, 8]

Residents most in need of public recreational opportunities often have the least access to parks. Research suggests that low-income neighborhoods have fewer and lower quality

parks than more affluent areas.[9] The quality of parks and the perceived safety of the surrounding neighborhood both shape how physically active residents are.[10] A 2006 study found that neighborhoods with concentrated health problems tend to have parks that lack facilities for physical exercise, contain visible litter or graffiti, and are located next to vacant lots, boarded-up buildings, industrial sites, or multi-lane roads.[11] Park quality, even more than the size or proximity of a park, is associated with park use by children and parents.[12] Parents in another study identified amenities such as the presence of shade, cleanliness of park grounds and restroom facilities, and availability of play structures as key factors shaping their choices about where they take their children to play.[13]

Access to clean, safe, and well-maintained park facilities is critical to improving residents' health and quality of life by promoting physical activity.[14] Active living during childhood and adolescence can lower the risk of developing chronic health conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure as an adult.[15] Residents in communities like West County are at higher risk for chronic illnesses like obesity and diabetes in part because they have less access to opportunities for physical activity.[16] Over one-third of Contra Costa County children of low-income families, ages 2-5 years, are either at risk of being or already are overweight. In addition, African-American and Latino children in the county, ages 5-19, are more likely to be overweight or obese than white and Asian children.[17]

A sign in a Richmond park

RESEARCH DESIGN

During Indicators Project community forums, West County residents raised the need for improving city park conditions, stating, "Kids don't have a place to play. We need cleaner and safer parks, meaning more security, trash bins, and clean bathrooms." Other problems, such as parks being near train tracks, the presence of alcohol and drug use, and broken glass were also identified. Positive visions, such as parks with community gardens "where we can grow our own food" were brought forward. When the Indicators Project began to examine these issues, we found that information on the state of parks was not being collected, so we set out to collect primary data to assess park conditions.

The Neighborhood House of North Richmond (NHNR) volunteered to lead a community survey to produce data on the conditions of city parks. NHNR had already formed the West County HEAL (Healthy Eating, Active Living) Collaborative–a project focused on changing policy to encourage healthy and active lifestyles in local communities. The HEAL Collaborative wanted to survey the physical conditions of the 52 parks in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo to collect information they could use to advocate for improvements, and to create new community leadership by engaging local youth in designing and conducting the survey.

In summer 2008, the Pacific Institute partnered with the HEAL Collaborative to design the parks survey and train local youth to conduct it. Through the 2008 Richmond YouthWORKS summer youth employment program, 13 youth were recruited to design and conduct the survey in July and August. At workshops co-facilitated by HEAL and Pacific Institute staff, the youth used their own visions and reasons for healthy parks to prioritize the information the survey would collect, deciding on specific park qualities to measure, adapting questions from university-led park studies, and developing new survey questions.

The survey was observational: survey teams visited parks and filled out information based on what they saw there. A survey was completed for each of the 52 parks in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo by teams of two youth and one adult visiting each park during daytime hours over the course of one week in July. Each team also carried a disposable camera, and each youth surveyor took one photo of something in the park he or she liked and another photo of something he or she would like to change. The results from the survey were compiled by Pacific Institute and HEAL staff, and the youth team analyzed the results and photos in data analysis meetings.

WHAT DID OUR RESEARCH FIND?

The park survey included 97 multiple-choice questions that asked surveyors to measure the availability and quality of park facilities, aesthetics, accessibility, and safety. Due to limited space, we report here on a selection of the findings, highlighting the results that were most striking or demonstrated problems identified in community meetings. [For a copy of the survey tool, contact the Pacific Institute at 510.251.1600 or info@pacinst.org.]

The majority of parks surveyed (36 out of 52) had grassy fields, but 21 had dead grass, 15 had lots of weeds, 13 were not mowed, and seven had patches of dirt. Out of 15 basketball courts found, two were in "well-maintained or decent shape." Only three parks had soccer goals set up, none of which were in parks west of 23rd street. Of 23 water fountains at 18 parks, only two were in "well-maintained or decent shape."

Of the parks that cover one acre or more in area, there were 22 with more than 20 trees, ten with 6-10 trees, two with 1-5 trees, and two with no trees. Of the 42 parks with benches, 16 had well-maintained benches.

Table 1. NUMBERS OF KEY FEATURES PER PARK

Park feature	Number of parks (out of total 52) containing the feature
Grass fields	36
Basketball courts	15
Soccer goals	3
Established soccer fields	0
Park benches	42
Public restroom	12
Water fountains	18
Crosswalks marked on adjacent streets	22
Bike racks	11
Murals	2
Parking for the disabled	8
Ramps at park entrances	27
Signs in language other than English	5
Litter or visible garbage	31
Visible graffiti	29

By race, the disparity is even more pronounced: the neighborhoods with the worse park conditions are 86% people of color, while those with better parks are only 69% people of color.

Of the 12 restrooms found, four were well maintained. Thirty-one parks had litter or visible garbage: mostly paper, broken glass, cigarette butts, and food wrappers. A few parks had clothes, drug paraphernalia, and condoms. Some of this litter was also present in the children's play and sandbox areas.

The final question of our survey asked the two surveyors observing each park their perception of the park's safety. Fourteen parks were considered safe, meeting the criteria that the youth surveyors "would come here alone, even at night." Twenty-six parks were mostly safe, meaning the surveyors "would come here most of the time in most situations." Ten parks were somewhat safe, as the surveyors "would think about how to stay safe if you decided to come here." Two parks, the North Richmond Baseball Field and Point Richmond Civic Park, were considered "not safe at all."

Table 2 lists the Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo neighborhoods that have one or more parks. For each neighborhood, we report the number of park features our survey found to be missing or in need of repair, as well as the median household income, percent people of color, and percent people under age 18. When neighborhoods are compared based on frequency of bad park conditions, patterns of income and race emerge that confirm residents' perception of inequitable park conditions. The median household income of areas with worse-than-average park conditions (more than 7.3 bad park conditions per park) is $40,912, while the average income of the areas with better-than-average park conditions (fewer than 7.3 bad park conditions per park) was $48,533. By race, the disparity is even more pronounced: the neighborhoods with the worse park conditions are 86% people of color, while those with better parks are only 69% people of color. Neighborhoods with worse park conditions also had a higher percentage of people under age 18 (30%) than neighborhoods with better park conditions (24%).

Table 2. NEIGHBORHOOD PARK CONDITIONS COMPARISON

Neighborhood*	Median Household Income	Percent People of Color	Percent People Under Age 18	Number of Parks	Bad Conditions per Park**
Country Club Vista	$ 48,660	73%	20%	2	3
Parchester Village	$ 28,974	84%	20%	1	4
Shields-Reid	$ 23,313	98%	38%	1	4
Marina Bay	$ 74,798	52%	12%	6	4.3
Richmond Annex	$ 47,530	51%	17%	2	4.5
El Sobrante Hills	$ 79,914	53%	23%	1	5
North Richmond	$ 24,131	95%	35%	1	5
Park View	$ 30,750	95%	35%	2	5
Point Richmond	$ 73,125	16%	9%	3	5
Metro Richmore Village	$ 39,955	89%	33%	1	6
Southwest Annex	$ 33,250	75%	24%	1	6
Atchison Village	$ 29,107	80%	32%	1	7
Greenbriar	$ 79,914	53%	23%	1	7
Hilltop Green	$ 57,012	64%	25%	1	7
East Richmond	$ 57,563	52%	21%	4	7
May Valley	$ 60,348	47%	24%	2	8
Belding Woods	$ 36,100	91%	35%	1	9
Coronado	$ 32,978	93%	28%	1	9
Hilltop Bayview	$ 46,766	71%	16%	1	9
Santa Fe	$ 28,768	97%	38%	1	9
San Pablo	$ 37,184	84%	32%	2	9
Fairmede/Hilltop	$ 50,443	87%	26%	2	9.5
North & East	$ 45,147	76%	27%	5	10
Park Plaza	$ 40,295	98%	29%	1	11
Cortez/Stege	$ 26,373	98%	37%	2	11
Laurel Park	$ 60,536	96%	30%	2	11
Iron Triangle	$ 26,011	97%	36%	4	12
				TOTAL: 52	***AVERAGE: 7.3***

Note: This analysis applies the same expectations to all parks while some standards set different criteria for different types of parks.

Demographic data source: Census 2000.

* Neighborhoods without parks are excluded from this list, including Carriage Hills North, Carriage Hills South, City Center, Countryside, Eastshore, Forest Park, Greenridge Heights, Hasford Heights, Hilltop Village, Panhandle Annex, Point San Pablo, and Pullman.

**A "bad condition" includes the absence of a key park feature (including restrooms, ramps for the disabled, crosswalks, bike racks); the disrepair of a park feature (including benches, barbeque pits, picnic tables, water fountains, walking or bicycle paths, shelter, lights, trash cans, slides, monkey bars, sandbox, playgrounds, fields, goals, basketball, or tennis courts); or the presence of a unwanted condition (including graffiti, trash "all over the place," or broken glass).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR WEST COUNTY?

The youth survey team, along with Neighborhood House and Pacific Institute staff, analyzed the survey findings and discussed their significance for neighborhood park users, active living and healthy lifestyles, and the city's park upkeep. Our comparison of the number of bad park conditions per neighborhood confirmed what survey teams noted anecdotally. Survey team member Leroy Merced commented, "What bothered me most was that the well-maintained parks were found more in the upper class areas." Surveyor Zadia Saunders similarly noted, "You could see what type of people must live there by looking at the parks." While survey data found an inequitable distribution of park problems, it also revealed problems in every park, suggesting a city-wide problem with park conditions.

Some park problems stood out more than others. Surveyor Chris Sivoraj felt that the "littering and trash show a lack of respect for the community." Zadia added, "It is not inviting if a park has no bathrooms or water fountains. And a lot of people in Richmond have disabilities, but we don't provide access to the parks for them." Lanisha Darlene Taylor expressed shock at finding condoms and drug paraphernalia, but reflected that "you can't be that shocked about the bottles and needles because that is what people expect of Richmond."

While our survey yielded compelling information on many park problems, its assessment of park safety was limited. Perceptions of safety may have been influenced by the survey being conducted during the day, by teams of youth and adults, and by the assignment of surveyors to parks in areas where they did not have personal safety concerns about rivaling neighborhoods. Though park safety is difficult to measure, studies have confirmed conditions such as maintenance problems, graffiti, litter, and poor lighting have a negative influence on perceptions of safety.[18]

This research also uncovered the role park design may play in racial tensions among Latino and African-American communities in West County. Fred Jackson of the Neighborhood House staff recalled:

> Not only did our survey work reveal inequities relative to our community parks, but our endeavors also uncovered undercurrents of potential violence involving accommodation of soccer versus baseball or football in some parks. Because soccer is primarily a Latino game, and football and baseball usually involve more African Americans, park design has caused some strain in the so-called Black/Brown relations. Several of our youth workers reported that on a number of occasions this issue in fact set the stage for a potential confrontation.

The park survey findings demonstrate a wide range of problems with park conditions in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo. Poor park conditions and a lack of usable recreational facilities discourage local residents, and youth in particular, from using their closest parks for physical and healthy recreational activity, which may be contributing to the higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other health conditions in these neighborhoods.

Trash cans in Richmond parks

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The summer park survey project concluded with a workshop on identifying solutions and developing an advocacy strategy for taking action on the survey research findings. The youth analyzed the agencies and funding structure related to city park investment and maintenance and identified several possible solutions to improve park conditions. Four have stayed on as youth advocates with the HEAL Collaborative to work to encourage collaboration between city agencies and neighborhood groups on a park improvement strategy that secures the resources required to boost investment in park facilities and maintenance. Over the course of the 2008-2009 school year, these youth presented their survey findings, identified and reached out to possible allies, and researched and advocated for the following solutions:

A slide in a Richmond park

Increase funding for park improvements by raising the park fees developers pay the city or by supporting a Parks Bond Measure.
The one-time park fee developers pay the city for each new housing unit they build—called an "in lieu fee"—offsets the public cost of providing park amenities for new residential developments. The City of Richmond currently charges $5,151 per development of a single family house, lower than that of any city in the county, which range from $6,118 to $12,274.[19] A Parks Bond Measure can also increase funding. Four local parks that benefited from state funding were found to be in better condition than many of the other parks surveyed.

Involve residents from diverse backgrounds in designing culturally and age-appropriate recreation programs.
Engaging residents in the development of recreational services benefits community health by promoting social interaction among residents of different ages and ethnic backgrounds. It also ensures that recreational programs are tailored and subsequently utilized. The Recreation Department should work with a cross-section of youth, immigrants, families, and seniors to identify and implement sports and recreational activities that can enhance health and social ties in the community.[20]

Address and prevent vandalism and graffiti by providing staffing for park clean ups and jobs for residents, especially youth.
Youth programs that create opportunities for legalized public art space and nurture artistic expression can deter vandalism. Such programs include supporting murals designed and painted by youth; sending youth caught tagging to "graffiti school" where they can paint legally and reflect on the causes and effects of tagging; and commissioning local youth artists to design graffiti murals with anti-tagging or anti-vandalism messages.[21]

Establish a program where community and youth artists plan and implement a community education campaign to improve and increase residents' use of and care for city parks.
Community education campaigns that appeal to a community conscience can reduce littering, traffic violations, and other quality-of-life issues at and around parks.[22] Such campaigns are particularly effective when they use the visual and performing arts as a means of spreading their message of moral responsibility, building a sense of civic pride, and encouraging self-compliance with quality-of-life regulations.[23] Community education campaigns can include organizing neighborhood games, interactive street theater, and other community-building events in the parks to encourage park use and raise awareness about ways that residents can better care for neighborhood parks.[24]

COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION AND CHANGE

City of Richmond Parks Division

Anthony Norris, Richmond Parks Superintendent
3201 Leona Avenue, Richmond, CA 94804
510.231.3073
anthony_norris@ci.richmond.ca.us

North Richmond Shoreline Alliance

Barbara Bream, Whitney Dotson
c/o West Contra Costa Group, Sierra Club
2530 San Pablo Ave., Suite I, Berkeley, CA 94702
510.367.5379
northrichmondshoreline@sfbaysc.org
www.northrichmondshoreline.org

Richmond Recreation and Parks Commission

1401 Marina Way South, Richmond, CA 94804
www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.asp?NID=1098
Meets 1st Wednesday of every month at 7:30 p.m. in the Richmond City Council Chambers.

West County HEAL Collaborative

Neighborhood House of North Richmond
820 23rd Street, Richmond, CA 94804
510.229.5055
www.nhnr.org/wcheal

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